


Nonfiction

# DAZZLE AND DANG



How one teen's tragic cheerleading accident turned her into a crusader for change

BY KRISTIN LEWIS



**AS YOU READ,  
THINK ABOUT:**

How does the determination to play at all costs affect young athletes?

# ER

**NARRATIVE  
NONFICTION**  
Reads like fiction—  
but it's all true

**W**hen the day began on December 17, 2009, Gabby Taylor, 15, had no idea that her life was about to change forever. She woke up early, ate a bowl of cereal, and headed off to school in Woodbury, Minnesota.

She was especially excited about cheer practice that afternoon. It would be the final practice before a big competition the next day. As co-captain of her squad at East Ridge High, Gabby felt intense pressure. But then, Gabby *thrived* under pressure. Her squad had won every competition that season, earning glory for their clean style and eye-popping acrobatics.

Near the end of practice that day, Gabby was working on a new stunt. It called for Gabby and three other girls to toss a fifth girl (called a “flyer”) into the air. The flyer would flip twice and land in the arms of the girls below.

The first time they tried the stunt, Gabby remembers the flyer’s shoulder landing on her neck—hard. The pain was searing but Gabby ignored it. They needed to get the stunt right, and she didn’t want to let her teammates down.

The second time they tried the stunt, Gabby felt the pain again. This time, though, it was worse, and Gabby sensed something was wrong. Her fingers tingled strangely, as if needles were pricking her skin.

What Gabby did not realize was that something terrible had happened inside her body. The repeated trauma had damaged her nerves—the delicate threads throughout our bodies that communicate information to and from the brain. Our nerves are responsible for every movement we make—every step, stretch, and flex—and every sensation we feel.

Now, Gabby’s nerves were in crisis.

*Push through the pain*, Gabby told herself. She helped to toss the flyer up again.

BAM! Gabby’s arm exploded with pain. It would soon turn purple and swell like a balloon. The pain was so **excruciating** all Gabby could do was cry.



Gabby before her injury  
(top right) and after  
surgery (right)

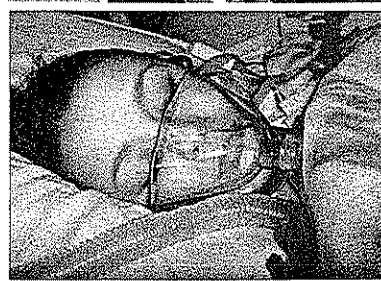


IMAGE SOURCE/GETTY IMAGES (CHEERLEADERS); COURTESY GABBY TAYLOR

## A New Breed

When cheerleading started in the late 1800s, injuries like Gabby's were unheard of. The first cheerleaders were rowdy college guys who formed "yell squads," leading the crowd in chants at football games. It wasn't until World War II that women began to dominate cheerleading, as men went overseas to fight. In most schools, though, being a cheerleader was a show more of popularity than of athletic skill.

Today's young cheerleaders are an entirely different breed.

Many do far more than rally a crowd. They cheer competitively, on school squads or through private gyms. These cheerleaders do stunts once reserved for circus performers. They flip, tumble, dance, and build astonishing pyramids in which rows of cheerleaders stand on top of one another, towering high into the air. And though they sometimes perform on hard, bone-cracking surfaces, they do not wear the protective gear you see in sports like hockey or football.

Not surprisingly, today's cheerleaders are in danger.

## A Perilous Sport?

The number of cheer injuries has been rising over the past 30 years, according to a new report in the journal *Pediatrics*. This is partly because there are far more cheerleaders today (about 3.6 million over the age of 6).

Another reason is that the sport has become competitive and the stunts far more risky.

Many cheerleading injuries are just bruises and strains—painful but relatively minor. In fact, fewer injuries are reported overall for cheerleading than for other sports.

The real concern is what are called "catastrophic injuries." Such injuries are as terrifying as they

sound: concussions, skull fractures, and spine injuries that can cause brain damage, **paralysis**, and even death.

It's these injuries that have doctors worried—and for good reason. In 2005, a 14-year-old in Massachusetts died after a **botched** toss ruptured her spleen. In 2007, an 18-year-old in California broke her neck after falling 15 feet

"I never  
imagined  
I would  
become one  
of those  
statistics."

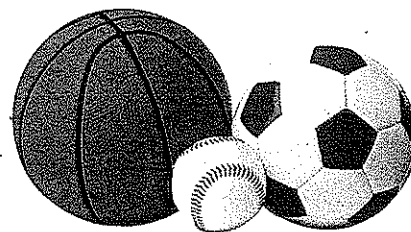
—GABBY TAYLOR

Below, Gabby  
stays positive  
in the hospital.



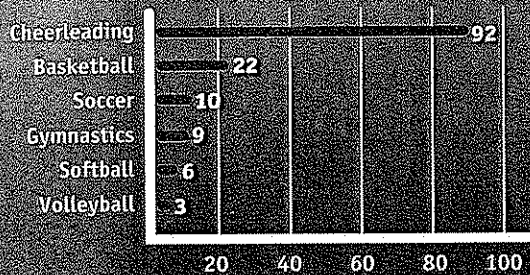
## THE STORY OF CHEERLEADING IN NUMBERS

Numbers tell many stories. Just look at the chart on the left. It tells a terrifying story about how perilous cheerleading is. The chart on the right tells another story. In 2005/2006, several cheerleading organizations put their heads together and came up with new rules to make the sport safer. *What effect did their efforts have? What story does the chart on the right tell?*



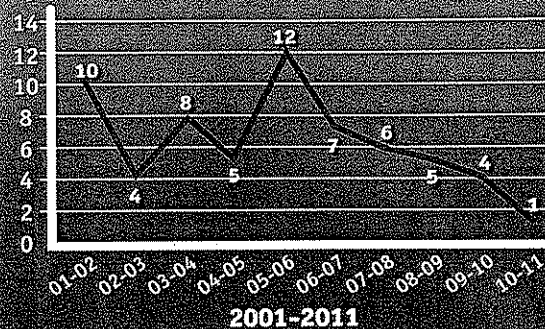
### The Number of Catastrophic Injuries

High School Female Athletes from 1982 to 2011



This graph shows the total number of catastrophic injuries, going back to 1982, by sport.

### The Rate of Catastrophic Injury in Cheerleading



This graph shows a rate—that is, how many catastrophic injuries occurred for every 1,000 times the sport was played.

headfirst into the ground. And today, cheerleading accounts for 65 percent of all catastrophic injuries among girl athletes in high school.

## Unbearable Pain

In the days after her accident, Gabby learned that severe nerve damage had paralyzed her right arm. What's more, she was in constant pain. Even a gentle breeze whispering across her arm was unbearable. After several procedures to numb her nerves were unsuccessful, she had spinal surgery that gave her some relief.

And Gabby's injury had a terrible side effect: Her immune system—that is, her body's system of fighting off illness—crashed. Now, every germ is potentially deadly to her, and a mild cold can mean a week in the hospital.

An injury like Gabby's affects more than just the body. It takes a

deep and lasting emotional toll. Gabby lost her entire way of life. She never got healthy enough to return to school. When she should have been learning to drive a car, or going to the movies, or worrying about a math test, she was stuck in a hospital bed. Suddenly, ordinary tasks like taking a shower, opening a container of yogurt, or buttoning a coat required **herculean** effort.

And while her friends were supportive, they didn't always get what her injury truly meant. "My friends didn't understand why I didn't feel up to walking around the mall or why I wasn't able to watch Friday night football games," Gabby remembers. "They didn't understand the pain I was going through emotionally."

## Making It Safe

So how can injuries like Gabby's be prevented? One way, according

to some experts, is for all states to officially categorize cheerleading as a sport, like gymnastics or field hockey. Twenty-nine states already do. In those states, cheerleading has safety rules and regulations just like any other school sport.

In the remaining states, including Gabby's home state of Minnesota, cheer squads are considered clubs, like the debate club or the chess club. As a result, some say, squads may lack proper oversight.

But a school doesn't have to officially recognize cheerleading as a sport to make it safer. For the past few years, a number of national organizations have been working together to reduce the number of injuries. The American Association of Cheerleading Coaches and Administrators, for example, publishes safety guidelines every year and



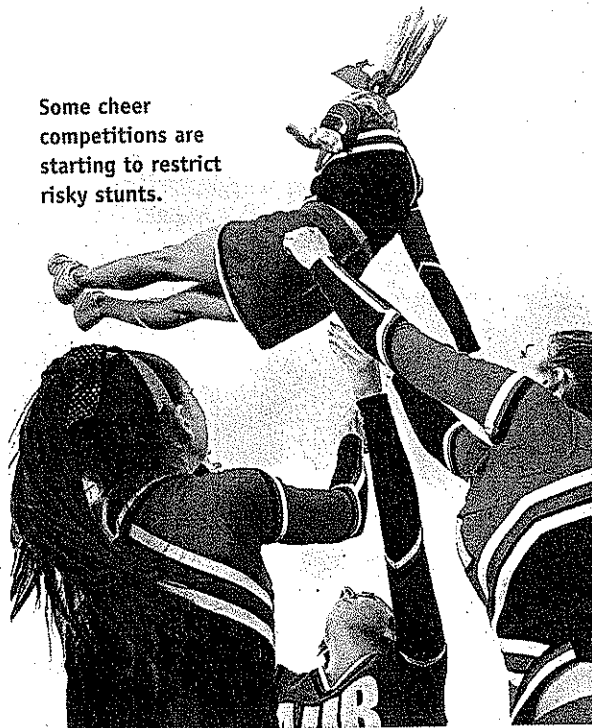


offers education and certification for coaches. Schools that work with organizations like this one can quickly improve the quality of their programs, says director Jim Lord.

And many have. In fact, in the past five years, catastrophic injuries in cheerleading have declined.

But the tragic truth is, things can still go wrong—even in programs that take precautions. Consider Gabby's squad: They had a certified trainer and state-of-the-art equipment.

Some cheer competitions are starting to restrict risky stunts.



players with concussions who keep tackling.

The motto "no pain, no gain" has become an accepted norm.

This pressure to play through injury comes from many places. It comes from parents, who have invested time and money in their child's training and who dream of a college scholarship. It comes from coaches, who want their athletes to perform at the highest level. And perhaps most acutely, it comes from young athletes themselves. Many set impossible standards, and fear that missing even one practice could jeopardize years of hard work as well as their status on the team.

## Speak Up

Gabby understands this better than anyone. "Doctors have told me that if I had refused to do that stunt a second or third time, I still might be cheering and in college today," she says.

Instead, Gabby is sharing her hard-learned lessons with others. Last year, she was crowned Miss Teen Minnesota and became a spokesperson for the National Center for Sports Safety. Now she travels the Midwest talking to kids about how to

be safe so that no one else will have to suffer the way she has.

Gabby still has bad days—days she is too sick to get out of bed, days when she is overcome with sadness for the life she could have had. But she has also discovered her extraordinary strength. After two years of grueling physical therapy, she can give a thumbs up and wiggle her fingers. She hopes to regain use of her arm one day.

In the meantime, Gabby's message to young athletes is simple: "When your body is hurt, speak up and communicate with a coach, friend, teacher, anyone. You only get one body in life, and you need to honor and respect it." ●

## Warrior Culture

Lord and other experts agree there is another reason kids are getting hurt in cheerleading. It has to do with what's known as "warrior culture," a mentality that likens a sports team to soldiers in battle. Nothing is as important as winning. Loyalty to teammates matters more than personal health. Persevering through injury is considered downright heroic.

This mentality is held by all kinds of athletes: Soccer players who score goals with torn knee ligaments, volleyball players who serve with sprained wrists, football

## CONTEST

### Author's Craft

In this article, the author suggests that the "no pain, no gain" attitude can be harmful to young athletes. What evidence does she use to support her opinion? Do you agree that this attitude is harmful? Explain. Use evidence from the article as well as your own ideas. Send your response to **CHEER CONTEST**. Five winners will each receive a copy of *Curveball: The Year I Lost My Grip* by Jordan Sonnenblick. See page 2 for details.



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